

SWIVEL JOINT APPARATUS AND METHOD FOR UTILITY SUPPLY TO A ROTATABLE BUILDING

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to rotatable buildings, and is particularly concerned with a service or utilities supply swivel joint apparatus and method for such a building.

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Although rotating buildings such as restaurants have been constructed in the past, up to now there has been no effective and safe way to provide services utilities or services such as water, gas or electrical power from stationary lines into the rotating part of the structure. Typically, such services are provided in a fixed central portion of the building about which an outer portion rotates.

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Some prior art references have proposed swivel structures for providing services within the rotating part of a building, but these are relatively complex and cumbersome, and would have problems in passing building safety codes. For example, U.S. Patent Nos. 3,599,378 of Kachnic and 3,636,975 of Kirkman both describe utility arrangements for rotating buildings. In Kachnic, a rotatable hollow support column is rotatably mounted on a fixed pedestal and extends upwardly through the building so as to rotate with the building. Various rotary T and L joints are provided for connecting fixed portions of the gas and water pipes with portions which rotate with the building. This produces a relatively complex structure. In Kirkman, a chamber member is fixed to a stationary base, and a cover member for the chamber member rotates with the building. The chamber and cover are provided with various opposing annular formations of generally U-shaped form or opposing partial chambers to which the fixed conduits and rotating conduits, respectively, are connected. This provides for waste material discharge, gas supply, and water supply. Again, this is relatively complex and would probably not pass building codes. It also does not provide for electrical connections into the building.

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U.S. Patent No. 4,353,608 of Massau describes a system of collectors for passage of fluids and electrical cables into and out of a rotatable dwelling. Each collector is generally annular in shape, comprising an inner fixed ring and an outer rotating ring rotatably connected together to define an annular chamber between them.

Another problem with existing swivel structures for rotatable buildings is that the seals between rotating portions of the swivel are subject to potential failure. There is no means of effectively detecting such failure other than by taste or appearance of the water supply, for example.

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SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It is an object of the present invention to provide a new and improved swivel joint apparatus and method for supplying utilities to a rotatable building.

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According to one aspect of the present invention, a swivel joint apparatus is provided for supplying utilities to a rotating building rotatable about a central axis, which comprises an inner, fixed spindle for securing to a fixed base of the rotatable building to extend co-axially with a central axis of rotation of the building, the spindle having a series of spaced, outwardly projecting annular flanges defining a series of annular chambers between each adjacent pair of flanges, each flange having an outer peripheral edge and at least one ring seal mounted on the peripheral edge of each flange, the flanges having a predetermined outer diameter, and an outer casing rotatably mounted on the spindle for securing to part of the rotating building, the casing having an inner diameter substantially equal to the outer diameter of the flanges, the casing forming an outer wall of each of the annular chambers and being in rotatable sealing engagement with each of the ring seals to seal the chambers. The spindle has a lower end wall with a plurality of ports for connection to fixed utility lines in the fixed base of the building for fluid supply to and from the building, and a bore extending from each port through the spindle to a respective annular chamber, with each chamber being connected to at least one port in the lower end wall. The outer casing has a series of axially spaced ports including at least one port communicating with each of the annular chambers.

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In an exemplary embodiment of the invention, each flange has an outwardly directed, annular sensor chamber spaced outwardly from the ring seal, the outer casing has a plurality of holes including at least one hole aligned with each of the sensor chambers, and a plurality of fluid sensors are mounted in the outer casing to project through the respective holes to sense any leakage of fluid past any of the seals. The sensor outputs are connected to a control unit which indicates failure of any of the seals. The simple construction of the rotary utilities swivel assembly is such that it can be easily accessed for repair, simply by

disconnecting the attached utility lines via suitable quick disconnect fixtures, and removing and replacing any malfunctioning seal. At least two sensors may be provided in each of the sensor chambers, so that seal failure will still be detected even if one of the sensors should fail.

5 At least four annular chambers may be provided on the spindle, and the chambers are of different sizes depending on the fluid to be passed through the chamber. The chambers may include a sewer chamber for transmitting waste from fixtures in the building to fixed sewer lines in the base, a gray water chamber for transmitting waste water from sinks, baths, showers and the like to
10 gray water disposal lines in the base, a water chamber for supplying mains water to taps in various fixtures within the rotatable building, and a gas supply chamber for supply of gas to any gas fixtures in the building. Two ring seals may be provided on each annular flange which separates two adjacent chambers, with
15 a sensor chamber between each pair of ring seals to detect leakage of fluid past any of the ring seals, the sensors in each sensor chamber between the gas supply chamber and adjacent chambers including both water sensors and gas sensors.

 In an exemplary embodiment, an electrical swivel assembly is mounted on the upper walls of the spindle and outer casing, the electrical swivel assembly
20 comprising a fixed contact core mounted on the upper wall of the fixed spindle and an outer rotating contact portion mounted on the upper wall of the outer casing, the spindle and contact core having aligned central through bores for passageway of fixed electrical power supply lines from the base of the building to the contact core, and the outer contact portion having contacts for connection
25 to power supply lines supplying power to fixtures within the rotating building. A separate rotary electrical connector may be mounted on the electrical swivel for supply of electrical signals such as telephone, television, cable, computer, e-mail and Internet to and from the rotating building, the rotary connector having a fixed part for connection to fixed electrical service lines extending through the
30 aligned central through bores of the spindle and electrical contact core, and a rotary part rotatably mounted on the fixed part and having conductors for connection to electrical service lines within the rotating building, the fixed part being coupled to the inner contact core of the electrical swivel.

 According to another aspect of the present invention, a method of
35 rotatably connecting fixed utility lines beneath a rotatable building to

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corresponding utility lines secured within the building and rotatable with the building is provided, which comprises the steps of:

5 connecting a plurality of fixed utility lines in a fixed base of a rotatable building to inlet ports at the lower end of a fixed spindle secured to the fixed base and extending co-axially with the axis of rotation of the building, the spindle having a plurality of axially spaced annular chambers defined between annular flanges projecting outwardly from the spindle, each port being connected to a respective chamber;

10 connecting an outer casing rotatably mounted on the spindle to part of the rotating building so that the casing rotates with the building, the casing forming an outer wall of each of the annular chambers; and

connecting a plurality of utility lines secured within the rotatable building to respective ports in the outer casing, at least one port in the outer casing communicating with each of the annular chambers;

15 The swivel joint apparatus of this invention is very simple and compact in construction, yet allows for reliable connection of fixed utility lines in a fixed base of a rotatable building to corresponding utility lines mounted within the rotating part of the building. The seal and sensor arrangement allows any leakage of fluids past a seal to be detected, avoiding or reducing the risk of different fluids
20 mixing together without knowledge of the occupants of the rotatable building. This swivel joint apparatus therefore enables a rotatable building to meet stringent building codes more readily.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

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The present invention will be better understood from the following detailed description of an exemplary embodiment of the invention, taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings in which like reference numerals refer to like parts and in which:

30 Figure 1 is a front elevational view of a rotatable building having a service supply swivel support apparatus according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention;

35 Figure 1A is a sectional view of the circled area labeled 1A in Figure 1, illustrating the outer rail support of the rotating part of the structure on the lower fixed base;

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Figure 2 is a cross-section through a portion of the support base of the building on lines 2-2 of Figure 1, with some of the utility lines into and out of the building omitted for clarity;

Figure 3 is front elevational view of the swivel support apparatus;

5 Figure 4 is a front elevational view, partially in section, of the inner fixed core of the swivel assembly;

Figure 5 is an enlarged section of the circled portion of Figure 4 labeled 5;

Figure 6 is a section on the lines 6-6 of Figure 4;

Figure 7 is a section on the lines 7-7 of Figure 3;

10 Figure 8 is a section on the lines 8-8 of Figure 3; and

Figure 9 is a sectional view of the electrical part of the swivel assembly.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

15 Figure 1 of the drawings illustrates a rotatable building such as a house or the like which has a rotatable portion or living area 10 rotatably supported on a fixed base 12 as illustrated in Figures 1A and 2. A service swivel joint assembly 14 according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention is provided in the fixed base for supplying electrical power and services, water,
20 gas, and other utilities to the rotating structure.

The rotatable building 10 in the illustrated embodiment is circular in shape, although other shapes may be utilized, and has an enclosed central living area 16, which preferably has windows around the entire circumference, surrounded by an annular deck or balcony 18 extending around the entire outer
25 periphery of the building. The fixed base 12 has a cylindrical outer wall 20 with an inverted T rail 22 of steel running around its upper rim, as illustrated in Figure 1A. The floor 24 of the rotating structure has a series of spaced inner and outer bearings 25,26 which run around the rail and which are mounted in wobble boxes 28 in groups of four. The base 12 provides a garage space for storage of
30 vehicles and the like.

The rotating portion 10 of the building is also rotatably supported at its center via a central elevator shaft 30 which is rotatably supported at its lower end on a bearing assembly 32 in a central swivel chamber or pit 34 which is located below the ground level and centered on the central axis of the building, as
35 indicated in Figures 1 and 2. Elevator shaft 30 extends upwardly from the submerged chamber 34 to the top of the building, and an elevator car 36 within

the shaft is suitably driven to transport the inhabitants from the garage level to and from the upper stories of the building. The central bearing assembly 32 is of sufficient strength to support the rotating elevator shaft 30. In one example, the shaft 30 had an outer diameter of six feet and a height of 28 feet, and the bearing was a six feet diameter, 1,364,000 lb bearing model A18-60P1B manufactured by Rotek, Inc. of Aurora, Ohio.

Various fixed utility lines such as sewer line 38, and other utility lines 40 such as water, waste water or gray water, gas, electrical power, and electrical services such as telephone, cable, television, computer, and the like, are directed into the chamber 34 for connection to a fixed part of the swivel joint assembly 14. Corresponding sewer 42, other utilities 44, electrical power lines 45, and electrical service lines 46 are connected to rotating parts of the swivel joint assembly at their lower ends, and extend upwardly alongside the elevator shaft 30 for connection to plumbing, gas and electrical fixtures throughout the rotating portion of the building. A drain line 48 extends downwardly from the roof of the building alongside the elevator shaft and back through a window 49 in the shaft within the chamber 34. Line 48 has an outlet end 50 directed downwardly in the pit or chamber 34. A drain outlet 52 is provided in the lower end of the chamber 34 for drainage of water from the roof. It will be understood that the various incoming and outgoing service lines are shown schematically and not in any particular order. Also, in practice, all of the lines can be directed outwardly through a single rectangular opening in the elevator shaft to one side of the shaft, although they are illustrated extending on opposite sides in Figure 2 for convenience and clarity. The arrangement of the incoming and outgoing lines will be dependent on the position of the building relative to the various adjacent service lines.

The swivel joint assembly 14 will now be described in more detail with reference to Figures 2 to 9. The assembly 14 has a lower portion 54 for coupling the gas, sewer and water lines into and out of the rotating structure, and an upper portion 55 for coupling the electrical power and service lines. The lower portion 54 basically comprises an inner fixed spool 56 and an outer swivel casing 60 rotatably mounted on fixed spool 56 as illustrated in Figures 3 and 6 to 8. The fixed spool 56 is coupled to the fixed base of the building via a torque bracket or lug 57 connected to torque tie 58 within pit 34, as indicated in Figure 2. The swivel casing 60 is connected to the rotating portion 10 of the building by supports beams 62 which extend across the top of the casing as illustrated in

Figures 2 and 3, and are secured at their opposite ends to the rotating shaft 30. The casing 60 is rotatably supported on a fixed brass bearing ring 61 at its lower end, which in turn is secured to torque bracket or lug 57, as indicated in Figure 3.

5 The fixed inner spool 56 is illustrated in detail in Figures 4 to 8 and has a central through bore 63 and a plurality of outwardly facing, annular chambers 64,65,66, and 67 separated by annular rings 68,69,70,71 and 72 at the top and bottom of the spool and between each adjacent pair of chambers. The swivel casing is a cylindrical member which rotates around the inner spool and has a
10 diameter slightly greater than the diameter of the outer rings 68 to 72, so that it forms an outer wall for each of the annular chambers, as best illustrated for chamber 65 in Figure 6 and chamber 64 in Figure 7. Ring seals 76 are mounted on each annular ring to project outwardly into rotatable sealing engagement with the inner surface of casing, 60, sealing each of the chambers from the adjacent
15 chambers and the exterior of the swivel joint assembly. One ring seal 76 is mounted on each of the upper and lower rings 68 and 72, while two spaced ring seals 76 are provided on each of the rings 69,70 and 71 which separate adjacent chambers, for additional security. The seals are of any suitable resilient seal material of sufficient durability and reliability. Suitable seals for use as the ring
20 seals 786 are Z-seals with a nitride or poly-vi lip and a fluorotrel base, as manufactured by Norther American Seals of Fresno, California.

 The annular chambers 64 to 67 are of different sizes, depending on the required fluid capacity. Each chamber is connected to one or more ports extending upwardly from the lower end of the spool through the central portion
25 of the spool and terminating in the respective chamber. The upper, relatively large annular chamber 64 is designated as a sewer chamber, the next chamber 65 is for gray or waste water, the third chamber 66 is for gas, and the fourth chamber 67 is for the clean water supply to the house. As indicated in Figures 4, 6 and 7, a series of three ports or bores 78 are connected to the fixed sewer
30 line 38 at the lower end of the spool, and extend upwardly through the spool to terminate in chamber 64. A port or bore 80 of equivalent diameter to ports 78 is connected to a fixed, gray water outlet line 40 and extends upwardly through spool 56 to terminate at an outlet 82 in chamber 65, as indicated in Figures 4 and 6. A third bore or port 84 of smaller diameter is connected to a gas line 40
35 at the lower end of the assembly 14 and extends upwardly through the spool to terminate at an inlet 85 into chamber 66. A pair of ports or bores 86 extend from

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fixed water lines 40 through the spool to terminate at an inlet 88 into the lowermost or clean water chamber 67, as illustrated in Figures 3,4 and 8.

5 The outer swivel casing forms an outer, rotating cylindrical wall for each of the chambers 64 to 67, and includes various ports for connection to utility lines extending to various fixtures within the rotating part of the building, such as
10 sinks, showers, baths, toilets, gas powered devices and the like. As best illustrated in Figures 3 and 7, three ports 90 project radially through the wall of casing 60 and communicate with the sewer chamber 64. A gray water port 92 is spaced beneath one of the ports 90 and communicates with the gray water
15 chamber 65. A small diameter gas port 94 is positioned in the casing beneath port 92 and communicates with gas distribution chamber 66. Finally, a pair of clean water ports 95 are positioned below port 94 and communicate with water chamber 67, as illustrated in Figure 8. The various sewer and utility lines 42,44,
only some of which are shown in Figure 2 for illustration purposes, are
15 connected to the various ports 90,92,94 and 95 and extend upwardly alongside the elevator shaft 30, exiting away from the shaft at the two or more floor levels for connection to the appropriate fixtures within the living areas of the rotating structure.

20 Each of the annular rings or flanges 68 to 72 defining the axial end walls of the various chambers also has a groove or indent 96 on its outer periphery which forms a sensor chamber. The indent 96 is located between the seal rings on the annular flanges 69,70 and 71 between adjacent chambers, and above or below the seal ring 76 on the end flanges 68 and 72, respectively. As illustrated in Figure 3, a pair of diametrically opposed water sensors 98 are mounted on
25 the outer swivel casing 60 to extend through sealed holes in the casing into the uppermost indent or chamber 96. A pair of diametrically opposed water sensors 98 are also mounted to extend through the casing into the chamber 96 in flange 69. These sensors will detect any leakage of sewer water from the sewer chamber 64. Water sensors 98 also project through the casing into the chambers
30 96 in flanges 70,71 and 72, as indicated in Figure 3, to detect any leakage of gray water from chamber 65, or clean water from chamber 67. Gas sensors 99 also extend into the chambers 96 in flanges 70 and 71 at opposite ends of the gas supply chamber 66, so that these chambers have sensors for detecting leakage of either gas or water past the seals 76, as illustrated in Figure 3.

35 The utility swivel assembly therefore incorporates multiple sensors for detecting failure of any of the ring seals. Each sensor chamber has at least two

sensors for water, and the sensor chambers between gas and water chambers have two water sensors and two gas sensors. This provides redundancy in case of failure of a sensor. There are two annular or ring seals between adjacent chambers, providing further redundancy to reduce the risk of any mixing between the various fluid inputs and outputs to and from the house. The sensor outputs will be connected to a control unit having a computer controller within the house, and will indicate failure of any of the seals. The swivel assembly is very simple in construction and provides easy access for repair or replacement of seals or sensors.

The upper or electrical portion 55 of the swivel assembly is mounted on top of the plumbing part 54 of the swivel, as illustrated in Figures 3,4 and 9. As best illustrated in Figure 9, the electrical supply swivel 55 is a three conductor electrical swivel, and includes an inner, fixed power conducting core 100 which is secured to the upper end of the fixed utilities spool 56 via coupling sleeve 102 secured to the upper end of the spool by mounting bolts 104, and an end plug 103 of the core which is keyed to the coupling sleeve 102. Electrical power supply lines 105 extend upwardly through the central through bore 63 in the fixed spool 60, into the conductive core 100, and are secured to three separate conductive rings 106,107 and 108 in the core 100, which are separated by insulator rings 110.

The electrical swivel has an outer rotating portion having a base plate 112 secured to the top plate 114 of the outer swivel casing 60 of the plumbing swivel, and a series of upwardly projecting posts 116 projecting upwardly from the base plate around a ring spaced outwardly from core 100, and connected to a top plate 118 at the upper end of the swivel. A junction box 120 is mounted on the rotating top plate 118 and the power supply lines 45 extend upwardly from box 120 along the elevator shaft and project outwardly for connection to various electrical sockets and appliances within the rotating portion of the house. Spring loaded brushes 122 project inwardly from the posts 116 to contact the three conductive rings 106,107, and 108, respectively. A connecting line 124 extends from each brush 122 to the junction box 120, as illustrated in Figure 9.

An eight conductor, low noise rotating electrical connector 126 is mounted on top of the electrical swivel 55 via a rubber coupling sleeve 128 bolted to the top plate 129 of the fixed part of the electrical swivel via threaded rods 130 and bolts 132. The connector 126 has a lower fixed portion 134 and an upper rotating portion 135 which is connected to the various electrical service lines 46

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extending into the house for communication of TV, telephone and computer signals and the like. The fixed portion 134 is coupled to the fixed core 106 of the electrical swivel. Fixed electrical service lines 136 for cable, computer, TV and telephone signals extend upwardly through the central bore 63 in the fixed spool
5 56, the center of the fixed power conducting core 106 of the electrical swivel, and a central opening 138 in the top plate 118 of the rotating part of the electrical swivel, and are connected to the fixed lower portion 134 of the rotary connector 126.

The electrical swivel 55 may be a standard, off-the-shelf electrical slip ring
10 swivel for providing 240 Volt, 200 Amp electrical supply to the rotating portion of the structure. The upper, rotary electrical connector 126 is preferably an eight wire, mercury filled rotating harness which is very low noise and produces minimal signal interference, such as the Model No. 830 rotating connector
available from Mercotac Inc. of Carlsbad, California, or equivalents. Similar
15 connectors with a greater or lesser number of conductors or different amperage or voltage may be used if required.

A suitable drive mechanism (not illustrated) will be provided for rotating the rotatable portion 10 of the house in either direction relative to the fixed base 12, with the swivel joint apparatus allowing all of the utility and electrical service
20 lines within the rotating portion of the house to rotate relative to the fixed part of the apparatus 14. In an exemplary embodiment, the drive mechanism used a three horsepower motor with ramp up and ramp down speed control so movement will not be felt by individuals within the moving part of the structure. The movement can be stopped, reversed, or varied as desired via a control
25 panel within the building, and may be manual or voice controlled.

The swivel joint apparatus 14 of this invention is very simple in construction and allows for easy access and repair. It has built in sensors for detecting any failure in the seals, and the seals, rotary bearings, and other portions of the apparatus are of sufficient strength and durability to potentially
30 last over twenty years without any major service. Unlike prior art swivel joints for rotating buildings, the apparatus 14 will meet most building codes for plumbing and electrical connections

Although an exemplary embodiment of the invention has been described above by way of example only, it will be understood by those skilled in the field
35 that modifications may be made to the disclosed embodiment without departing from the scope of the invention, which is defined by the appended claims.